

A Field Guide to Love and the Los Angeles River

TILLY MARIE HINTON

Emeritus Professor Heather Goodall

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Certificate of Original Authorship

I, Tilly Marie Hinton, declare that this thesis, submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Doctor of Philosophy, in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology Sydney.

This thesis is wholly my own work unless otherwise reference or acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

This document has not been submitted for qualifications at any other academic institution.

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Dedicated to water,
which shapes the world,
softly.

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Keywords

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Los Angeles River
love
narrative
nature
oral history
rivers
socionatural
urban history
urban rivers
urbanism
water

Abstract

With more humans living in cities than any other landscape, and our ecological impacts more cumbersome than any other moment in human history, there is a strong imperative to understand and critique how we relate to nature in urban environments. This thesis takes the contemporary history of one of the planet's most-recognised damaged places, the concrete-entombed Los Angeles River, and examines it through the lens of love—and more specifically intimacy—to build new understandings of human connections to the environment. Oral history interviews with public officials, campaigners, designers, architects, artists, and community members, along with archival and place-based research, tell stories of deep emotional affinity with a profoundly urban river and attest to the power of regarding cities as legitimately natural landscapes, worthy of our attention and our care. Inspired by the generic conventions of the naturalist's field guide, the thesis takes three material objects important at the river—water, paint, and weeds—and through them maps a new definition: that intimacy is a state of being sustained, feeling belonging, and paying close attention to places that matter to us. The field guide component of this work is prefaced by a series of grounding chapters that explore the sociodemographic, economic, and cultural characteristics of Los Angeles and her river; constructions of nature and naturalness; the state of environmental history, a subfield that has been criticised for paying insufficient regard to the role of emotions; the particularities of river historiography; and key concepts in the scholarship of sense of place and of the emotions. Contrary to popular and scholarly representations of the river as a forgotten landscape, this research demonstrates that it has long featured significantly in the emotional terrain of people and the city. If a highly altered river, repellent in many ways, has maintained and indeed increased its importance as a place of nature in the city, this thesis offers a new way to think about human connectedness, to the more-than-human world in the Los Angeles River watershed in particular, and in urban life in general. From both there are opportunities for instructive, inspiring, and ecologically responsible engagements with strangely complicated socionatural places, opportunities that merit close and critical attention.

List of Abbreviations and Notes on Terminology

Alt. 20—Alternative 20 (the agreed approach, from a range of alternatives, to ecological restoration of the Los Angeles River led by the US Army Corps of Engineers, the City of Los Angeles and a range of other stakeholders)

EPA—Environmental Protection Agency

FEMA—Federal Emergency Management Agency

FoLAR—Friends of the Los Angeles River

IPCC—Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change

LA—Los Angeles (to remain faithful to original source materials, occasionally L.A. is used)

LACDA—Los Angeles County Drainage Area

LA River—Los Angeles River

NARA—The U.S. National Archives and Records Administration, at Riverside

UCLA—University of California, Los Angeles

Australian spelling and metric measurement has been used throughout, except in proper names and in quotes.

Currency is in US dollars and is as reported in the primary sources, without conversion.

“Watershed,” rather than the Australian term “catchment,” is used to describe the entire land area from which water flows into the river.

References to the left and right banks of the river are taken from the vantage point of an observer facing downstream.

In Los Angeles, freeway names are commonly used as placemarkers and navigational aids and, when doing so, people will use a shorthand naming convention in which, for example, the Interstate 5 highway becomes simply “the 5.” I do likewise in this thesis.

Table of Contents

Certificate of Original Authorship.....	i
Acknowledgements	iii
Keywords	v
Abstract.....	vi
List of Abbreviations and Notes on Terminology	vii
Table of Contents	viii
List of Figures	x
1. INTRODUCTION	1
1.1 Meeting the river.....	1
1.2 A loving gaze.....	11
1.3 An imagined invisibility	14
1.4 Cities are our nature	18
1.5 Love and intimacy as emotional terrains	18
1.6 Getting to know the river	22
1.7 Tangled relationships of nature and culture.....	32
1.8 Whose river, whose stories.....	36
1.9 Writing intimately	57
1.10 Mapping the research terrain.....	64
2. LOCATING THE LOS ANGELES RIVER.....	69
2.1 Understanding Los Angeles.....	69
2.1.1 Fragmentation and frustration	73
2.1.2 Layered histories of belonging	75
2.1.3 A city of industry	82
2.1.4 Dangerous injustices	86
2.2 Understanding the river	90
2.2.1 An unruly place	92
2.2.2 A park in perpetual progress.....	95
2.2.3 From margins to mainstream	96
2.2.4 Getting closer and closer	98
3. PLACES ARE EMOTIONAL TERRAINS.....	101
3.1 History of emotions	101
3.2 Love	103
3.3 A turn to place.....	108
3.4 Place and emotion.....	119
3.5 Place in history	122
4. OUR VERY URBAN NATURE	125
4.1 Nature cannot be far away	125
4.2 Environmental history	137
4.3 The place of cities.....	145
5. A RIVERLY HISTORIOGRAPHY.....	153
5.1 Rivers as a measure of society.....	153
5.2 How rivers make us think	157
5.3 Rivers and change.....	161
6. A FIELD GUIDE TO WATER.....	173

6.1	The sustaining power of water	175
6.2	Contrasting conceptions of ecological value.....	185
6.3	A river for fishing	187
6.4	A river for boating	192
6.5	That just leaves swimming.....	200
6.6	River temperaments	202
6.7	Cleaning up the “death gunge”	210
6.8	Water sustains	212
7.	A FIELD GUIDE TO PAINT	216
7.1	River Catz.....	218
7.2	Meeting of Styles.....	228
7.3	Graffiti eradication.....	245
7.4	Articulating belonging.....	256
7.5	Gangs and graffiti	260
7.6	A place to belong	263
8.	A FIELD GUIDE TO WEEDS.....	267
8.1	You don’t know the river until you meet Arundo.....	268
8.2	What are weeds.....	272
8.3	When plants make the place	277
8.4	Tenacity of weeds	281
8.5	A gateway to restoration	286
8.6	Noticing the connections	291
8.7	Paying close attention	297
9.	THE FUTURE HAS MANY PASTS	302
9.1	A loved river.....	302
9.2	An extreme place	305
9.3	The thesis from a bird’s eye view	307
9.4	Calls to action	313
	9.4.1 Take places seriously	313
	9.4.2 See in new ways.....	315
	9.4.3 Cultivate emotion.....	316
9.5	A future for river history	318
9.6	In closing.....	320
	BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	326
	Appendix 1: Oral History Interview Protocol.....	347
	Appendix 2: Thematic Summary of Interviews.....	348

List of Figures

Figure 1: The river before channelisation, near Highland Park in 1912.....	5
Figure 2: Images from the upper stretch of the Los Angeles River	6
Figure 3: Images from the middle stretch of the Los Angeles River.....	7
Figure 4: Images from the Downtown stretch of the Los Angeles River	8
Figure 5: Images from the lower stretch of the Los Angeles River	9
Figure 6: Los Angeles River overview map	10
Figure 7: Signage near a homeless encampment.....	16
Figure 8: Images from the Bowtie Parcel	28
Figure 9: The Hyperion Ave Bridge at Atwater Village.....	31
Figure 10: Channelisation in the upper reaches of the river.	31
Figure 11: River repairs in Downtown Los Angeles.	32
Figure 12: Downtown Los Angeles	83
Figure 13: Los Angeles River Land Use map	86
Figure 14: Homeless encampment.....	88
Figure 15: Poverty Ratio Map for Los Angeles.	90
Figure 16: Experiments in bio filtration	95
Figure 17: Scannell and Gifford's "Tripartite Model of Place Attachment"	111
Figure 18: The Ed Reyes Greenway.....	127
Figure 19: Detritus after flooding in Frogtown.....	133
Figure 20: A Great Blue Heron at the Bowtie Parcel.....	148
Figure 21: The river through Downtown Los Angeles in early morning light	149
Figure 22: Companion Map for A Field Guide to Water.....	173
Figure 23: A river picnic.....	175
Figure 24: Water outflow at Long Beach	178
Figure 25: A view from the Bowtie Parcel.....	179
Figure 26: Tenacious and orderly weeds	182
Figure 27: View from the Sunnynook Footbridge.....	183
Figure 28: Dominguez Gap Wetlands.....	183
Figure 29: Afternoon fishing.....	190
Figure 30: Kayaking as satire.....	196
Figure 31: Commemorative Los Angeles River Expedition "stamps"	197
Figure 32: Airport Welcome Poster	198
Figure 33: Companion Map for A Field Guide to Paint	216
Figure 34: An early cat painting.....	220
Figure 35: One of Leo Limon's River Catz.....	225
Figure 36: Blotches of graffiti abatement	227
Figure 37: "Blotch city, blotched river"	227
Figure 38: A moment at the Meeting of Styles.....	232
Figure 39: Meeting of Styles title piece.....	233
Figure 40: Great Wall of Los Angeles mural on Tujunga Wash.....	236
Figure 41: <i>Cultivate Love</i> piece	238
Figure 42: Meeting of Styles piece	239
Figure 43: Graffiti removal	247
Figure 44: Abatement in the Downtown Los Angeles stretch.....	250

Figure 45: MTA tag in Downtown Los Angeles	252
Figure 46: Saber river piece.....	254
Figure 47: Companion Map for A Field Guide to Weeds.....	267
Figure 48: Urban sanctuary.....	270
Figure 49: <i>Arundo donax</i>	271
Figure 50: Ernie’s Walk Pet Commemorative	275
Figure 51: Fountain Grass and Mexican Fan Palm.....	283
Figure 52: Organised weeds	293
Figure 53: The headwaters.....	299
Figure 54: Whatmore and Boucher’s typology of competing narratives	317
Figure 55: A river of history	325